

Durham Research Online

Deposited in DRO:

08 June 2017

Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Abram, S. (2017) 'Contemporary obsessions with time and the promise of the future.', in Anthropologies and futures : researching emerging and uncertain worlds. London: Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 61-82.

Further information on publisher's website:

<http://www.bloomsbury.com/9781474264884>

Publisher's copyright statement:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Bloomsbury Academic in Anthropologies and Futures: Researching Emerging and Uncertain Worlds on 04/05/2017, available online:<http://www.bloomsbury.com/9781474264884>.

Additional information:

Use policy

The full-text may be used and/or reproduced, and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes provided that:

- a full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- a [link](#) is made to the metadata record in DRO
- the full-text is not changed in any way

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

Please consult the [full DRO policy](#) for further details.

<CN> 5

<CT>CONTEMPORARY OBSESSIONS WITH TIME AND THE PROMISE OF THE
FUTURE.

<CA>Simone Abram

<A>Contemporary obsessions?

This chapter considers the notions of future that are embedded in the notion of land-use planning, sometimes known as Urban Planning or Town and Country Planning. Since planning as it is practiced in Western Europe would appear to be inherently future-oriented, it offers insights into future-methodologies both as ethnographic objects (planning's futures) and for ethnographic methods themselves (studying planning's futures). Through a discussion of forward planning and planning for housing in England, the chapter highlights the different temporal horizons of the future, the varying notions of human agency in achieving particular futures, whether dangerous or mundane, and the very different means of conceptualizing both a static future of the imagination, and a dynamic trajectory between now and then. While planning futures are sometimes conceptualized as Utopian, the reality of governmental planning is far more mundane and instrumental, with only quite occasional appearances of overblown scenarios or imagined worlds. More commonly, future planning is reduced to a process of applying governmental methodologies based on quite abstract policy imperatives. This chapter shows how Utopian or Dystopian futures bounce in and out of the mundane practice of governmental planning to show how bureaucratic processes work to reduce broader future concepts to manageable mechanisms.

Land-use planning is an example of future-thinking to have emerged strongly in the twentieth century, in contrast to conventional religious or enlightenment temporalities and most certainly with different temporal horizons. Foucault noted a shift in the concern of

governments once the development of statistical techniques enabled them to manage their populations (or at least to imagine that they did), but this can be complemented by the observation that the concern to govern changed in form again from the nineteenth century to the twentieth century. The most notable shift was the increasing attention paid not just to managing the population now, but in controlling its future. The field of town planning thus emerged in its contemporary form in the UK early in the twentieth century on the back of new sciences of hygiene, for example, as well as through the domestication of colonial development practices (Reade, 1987; Porter 2010; cf. Peattie 1970). The social movements that were to become institutionalized through the Town and Country Planning Association and then formalized in various parliamentary Acts, for example, aimed to improve the conditions of the poor, in the name of progress and humanity, ultimately aiming to replace Christian charity with comprehensive Welfare by means of rights related to land and property. In brief, they were concerned with what Reade refers to as 'the land question' (1987: 36), essentially a question of class. Land-use planning gradually evolved into a concern with the 'balanced' distribution of economic activity, followed by attempts to promote material equality after the Second World War, before it morphed into a primarily technical bureaucratic operation to maximize resource use, presaging a bouncing back and forth between government-directed social improvement versus investor/market-led development. Gradually, through the twentieth century, a stronger imperative to instigate increasingly comprehensive state forward-planning emerged (Murdoch and Abram 2002).

Despite a declared political adherence among many Western governments to 'free' markets, the practice of demanding long-term future plans from regional and local government bodies continues. At the central governmental level, the motivation for planning is often rhetorically linked to grand, global or existential issues: the need to tackle issues that cannot be accommodated in the market, by individuals or isolated groups such as climate

change, environmental pollution, or civilizational aims. The motivation to plan thus relies on both apocalyptic and utopian ambitions, but as it moves into practice, the invocation of threatening or inspiring scenarios becomes more marginal, appearing more often as a framing comment or reference.

<A>Materially planned futures

In the UK, the state requires all local authorities (municipalities) to produce regular forward plans that are used as guidelines for decisions on particular development applications made by external parties in the planning period. This reflects a split in planning practice between future-oriented policies and the detailed regulation of particular acts of development. The scope of forward plans has varied over time, but such plans generally sets out directions of future development, from the broad brush (an aim to be sustainable) to the specific (x number of units of development in y location). The four-to-five year planning period is usually considered in relation to a future-horizon of up to two decades, so a more distant future is the premise for more concrete near-future policies. Each plan is ostensibly public, and is put in the public domain for comments and objections before it is authorized. This is pragmatic, in the sense that planning is about externalities – ensuring that development does not impinge on neighbouring property (or the rights of its owner), but also hard won through post-war campaigns for citizen-participation. Although the planning system does categorize development actors into proposers and objectors of specific policies, in practice objectors often have alternative suggestions as well as different approaches to articulating priorities for the future. Anthropologists have long taken for granted that the objects of their interest are the subjects of regimes, and it makes sense to see that governmental urban or land-use planning are means by which the state attempts to govern populations, and through which contests over who controls land and resources are played out. I use the term 'played out',

since 'resistance' and its corollary, 'force' offer a crude dualistic model for the multi-party struggles over loosely specified aims in varying contexts. While the focus in studies of resistance is largely on the issues at stake and how various actors organize to attempt to control them (or resist their control), anthropologists are now paying more attention to the subtle ways by which the future is presented materially in the everyday (Pink and Lewis offer a discussion in terms of resilience: 2014). The future is not only invoked in the grand debates about future plans noted above, but future urban plans have quiet ways of making themselves present.

Since the post-war period, British planning has also required local authorities to make public announcements of all applications by landowners for permission to embark on development activities (known as 'planning permission'). Questions over particular, concrete futures have found their way into material forms in largely obfuscatory, if public, ways. Lists of current applications usually appear in small print in the adverts section of the local press (which in Britain is largely the vehicle for reporting local crime and planning issues). Sheets of formally coded, tightly printed A4 text also appear in the location of a site that is the subject of planning permission, often nailed to nearby lamp-posts, or sometimes taped to trees. The use of visual methods to observe the materialization of the future in the present reveals broader, if equally taken for granted, visual indications of future plans. Hoardings are often a precursor to the transformation of a building site, for example, either anonymously shielding secret activities, or flamboyantly advertising a future utopia, complete with the name of its sponsor.ⁱ Thus the signs of future construction activities are displayed in the present through various visual means other than the actual activities of building (see Figure 5.1). Our ability to interpret these signs depends on our familiarity with contextual information about building regulations, planning permission, tax exemptions or other institutional conditions. All is not always as it seems, however, since the promise of

completion may be elusive. For example, for years Spain was rife with half-finished buildings where one floor was left unfinished, since tax was only liable on completed buildings. Ireland was left with arrays of half-built villas and ranches when the financial crisis led to an abrupt cessation in the flow of capital for building projects. And as Baxstrom reports, residents in some areas of Kuala Lumpur might find buildings suddenly demolished or constructed without notice as they leave their houses in the morning, or return at night (2013).

<INSERT FIG. 5.1a-d near HERE. Please tile the images so the four together take up one full page.> <fig number and caption>Fig. 5.1. Banalized urban futures materialized. Images from the city of Sheffield. Photos by Simone Abram.

Such observations might suggest that futures have only a rhetorical (including visual) role in planning practice. But planning practice refers to a broad range of activities, from urban design to abstract policy development. While one might imagine that a plan is a kind of 'blueprint', a detailed site-specific design for something to be constructed, British plans are more like policy papers including general principles and some general site-identification. In this they are quite different from the development plans found in other European countries. Norwegian plans, for example, often contain detailed holistic mapped-guides to development, tying in provision of schools, medical centres, sports grounds, shops and other facilities related to new housing development. Swedish housing development plans include design principles and rules on the number of metres between housing and children's play areas. British plans contain no design guidance, outside broad designations such as conservation areas or areas of 'outstanding natural beauty'.

These forward policy plans, while interesting documents in themselves, are only a small part of the planning process. Rather like the dry minimal minutes of long, crowded, contentious meeting, they reflect little of on-going practices of revision, negotiation, political competition and public contest. The many, differently conceptualized futures that are elaborated and debated during the process of planning are often quite invisible in the plan document itself, and the plan is later invoked rarely, perhaps only referred to as one factor to be considered when applications to develop a particular site are debated in council planning committees. Even so, the plan – either the document or the idea of a plan existing – operates as a kind of promise that requires validation, and promises, as Austin recognized, may live for a long while without being fulfilled, as long as their fulfilment can be imagined (Abram and Weszkalnys 2013). Even a municipal housing plan promises something. Whether it is hope or fear, it is a statement about the future that must have some credible chance of becoming, if it is to maintain its status as a policy. Whether promises made into the plan then begin to become apparent in the hoardings and notices on boards by building sites becomes a measure of felicity that could (although it very rarely is) become a measure of governmental credibility once its imagined future becomes the present or past.

<A>Planning for the future

Studies of the future note that futures are not merely visions of possible worlds, but that they generate action in the present to effect or avoid those visions (see Wallman 1992). Nowhere is this clearer than in state and local practices of planning, since planning, by definition, is a means to try to stabilize the very uncertainty of the future. Planning proceeds by ascertaining predictabilities and attempting to secure them by design, or, as Abram and Weszkalnys suggest, by conceptualizing the possibilities that time offers space (2013).

One means by which this is attempted is through the adoption of statistical and demographic procedures. Population trends, house-building records and economic forecasts circulate in a hierarchical flow from central government to local government and then back to central government, in an example of what Rose and Miller call the state's own system (1990). Until 2013, the system worked by first gathering information locally, aggregated to a centralized planning level, then disaggregated down again to distribute the additional capacity required. There are 'statutory consultees' at each step of the planning process, including service providers, national interest groups and NGOs, including RSPB (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds: a major UK landowner), TCPA (Town and Country Planning Association), CLA (Country Landowners Association), HBF (House Builders Federation), utilities, health services, education services, Friends of the Earth, National Trust, etc. (Murdoch and Abram 2002).

Since 2013, when the English regional tier of government was abolished, each district has to produce a Local Plan with a fifteen-year horizon, taking account of 'longer-term requirements' and being kept up to date. Each local authority has to prepare a 'Strategic Housing Market Assessment' (note the introduction of markets), to identify the likely need for housing in their area to meet demographic projections. They must also prepare a 'Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment,' ostensibly to identify land that could satisfy the identified market demand for different scales and mixes of housing. (DCLG 2012). While apparently delegating planning to the most local level, in fact these local plans must now be in accordance with a series of national plans for major infrastructure, housing, gypsy sites, waste management, and so forth.

This is all well and good in theory, but what does it mean in practice? In a series of publications throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, Jonathan Murdoch and I outlined the workings of this system in practice, and in 1997, I spent six months doing fieldwork on a

local plan in Aylesbury Vale to examine the process of local planning 'on the ground'. We used a combination of methods, including analysing the planning texts and reviewing all of the objections made to the proposed plans, taking guided tours of the districts with different people, in-depth interviews with a cross-section of these objectors (from citizens to landowners and statutory authorities) and with officials, attendance at public examinations of the policies, council meetings, protest actions, and participant observation in one designated development site over six months. Taking the plan as the focus of the ethnographic enquiry, rather than a particular location, our research was more non-sited rather than multi-sited (Abram 2001a), although we also pursued a kind of nested geographical focusing. So while our research activities took us all over the southeast of England, we focused in first on the county of Buckinghamshire (north west of London), within that the district of Aylesbury Vale, and within that, the settlement of Haddenham. By 'following the plan' and its various policies, we were able to use principles from ANT to trace the links and relations between actors and actants, and to use ethnographic methods to dig below the policies and institutions and understand how each element was interpreted by the actors involved. Since planning disputes are often about the broader implications of policy and the significance for different participants of the plans proposed (including elements of landscape-nationalism), each party often adopts stereotyping language about their opponents. To get beyond the performative conflictual language of 'nimbyism' or 'selfish capitalists', and the manipulative PR strategies of the professional participants, we needed to understand the human actors are rounded social beings. In-depth extensive ethnographic methods were the means to achieve these aims.

It was swiftly clear that little of the planning perspective from the district council planning office was shared by local residents, while house builders approached the planning system through game-playing with the ultimate and over-riding concern of maximizing profit and 'shareholder value'. Much of the debate around the plan concerned housing numbers (see

Abram 2001b). In the large village where I did most of my participant-observation, many residents recognized that houses in the village were far too expensive for young or lower-earning people, but that additional housing numbers identified in the plan would not ensure that smaller, cheaper housing would be constructed. The village's history is documented back to Saxon times; it was a key location in the English civil war, and one of the first English villages to buy itself out of servitude to the church. A village of land-owning farmers (or 'yeomen'), it had held an annual market for centuries, and had declined only during the general urbanization of the twentieth century, particularly post-Second World War. A new estate of 400 houses built in the 1970s in a village of then around 2,000 people had been a great upheaval, and villagers described how it had taken many years before the 'old' village had adapted to the new arrivals. Expanding village activities and traditions to accommodate new residents was demanding and was felt to have endangered village social life for some time. Continued expansion changed the nature of the village, from an intensely social location to a commuter dormitory. Escalating prices also meant that 'our children' were forced to move away, a doubly difficult problem for low-earning young families who were forced to move away from the free childcare and support that grandparents provide. Most villagers were keen that smaller and cheaper homes should be made available for village families, but as illustrated above, this is not catered for in the planning system. So, while villagers would say that they welcomed affordable homes, they could not see any justification for more highly priced 'executive housing', and objected most strongly to the proposed plans.

< **INSERT FIG. 5.2a-b** > **Figure 5.2: The village idealized from the inside. Photos by Simone Abram.**

At the same time, villagers had concerns about broader social and environmental issues, relating to the capacity of village services to accommodate a growing population (a medical centre, library, two primary schools), the potential increase in car traffic and associated pollution (including noise pollution and road danger to children), loss of landscape, including views from existing buildings, and so forth. The future vision of villagers was thus heavily influenced by the idiom of village life, the risk of overwhelming the social relations imagined as a small rural community, and the generalized issue of 'over-development' and loss of biodiversity, alongside inter-generational justice. Some villagers were also concerned that the value of their property might diminish if the village became a town, which could make it difficult to move elsewhere, to some other village more fitting to their ideal of village life if the current one were to be 'ruined' through 'excessive development'. Groups of villagers met in each others' comfortable living rooms to plan demonstrations outside planning meetings; actions to raise money to employ barristers to fight their case against the plans; and general village awareness-raising. On another day, one might meet them helping out at a coffee morning for elderly people, at Morris-dancing training sessions in preparation for Mayday, or practicing handbell-ringing for the village fête. This description does not do justice to the variety and distinctions of village life, of course. There were also newer residents who campaigned to stop lorries visiting the poultry farm in the middle of the village (much to the farmer's distress); a distinctive working-class community within the village; a generation of professionals who had downsized in the 1970s; a range of Christian fellowships and churches (Anglican, Methodist, Unitarian); as well as various commercial organizations, including the national headquarters of a charity founded in the village, manufacturing and other business. Even so, during the 1990s, the village had lost its local bank branches, most of its shops and several pubs, although quite a few remained. Many villagers I interviewed, however, described their 'discovery' of the village through the approach to the church and village green,

and seeing the vision of the idyllic English village, 'knew' that they would move here and perpetuate that ideal.

<INSERT FIG. 5.3 HERE> <figure number and caption> Figure 5.3: The village seen in planning documents (Aylesbury Vale District Local Plan Proposals Map 2004)

In contrast, the future-vision of the planners, shared at least partly by members of the planning committees at regional and to some extent local level centred on the question of where to house future generations. These imagined future generations were not imagined as kin or offspring of current actual residents, but as a general demographic proportion of the national future population who deserved good housing as well as anyone. Their future vision was also framed around an environmental concern with climate change and a need to reduce pollution and energy consumption. This concern was channelled through criteria-based evaluations such as national policies on ideal features of sustainable settlements, including the magical 10,000 population figure of government guidance, and the possibility of reducing people's 'need to travel' by providing housing and employment sites in the same settlement, and expanding those settlements with connections to public transport.

For the planning authorities, this history of increased housing – the building of several large housing estates around the original village – became not a reason for some other village to take its turn to increase its housing stock, but a trend that justified further expansion. In DCLG's terms, sustainable housing should be located where there was access to work and transport, and a population of 10,000 was considered sufficient to justify investment in public transport infrastructure. Based on its proximity to railway connections (a commuter service taking around an hour to London) and the presence of manufacturing industry (paper products, garden equipment, and later spice processing – see Abram 2004), the village was

identified even at the regional level as a likely location for further housing development that would be considered 'sustainable'. In other words, from the planners' perspective this village could expand 'sustainably'.

<INSERT FIG. 5.4 HERE> <figure number and caption> Figure 5.4: Village houses.

Photos by Simone Abram.

Amongst these diverse formulations of the future, planning arguments about the appropriate number of new houses, derived from the rather arcane and abstract statistical techniques of the ministry were perceived as an extremely blunt instrument, but dominated (and continue to dominate) both planning and media discussions about housing. Debates in the media about housing in Britain, or at least in England, revolve around all sorts of arguments about a shortage of housing. But as Danny Dorling has pointed out, there are more than enough dwellings in all English cities to accommodate the people who require housing. The so-called housing shortage in the UK is more accurately understood as a problem of unequal access to housing finance and relates to the location of available housing. Through the forum of their Federation, house builders adopted an approach of discussing construction numbers, and have largely co-opted government departments into thinking in terms of annual housing completions as the key measure for housing policy evaluation. By comparing household formation and housing construction, government and lobbyists succeeded in reducing land-use planning to more or less the allocation of housing construction figures and business land availability. They became a system for producing profitable planning permissions. Even governments convulsed by housing numbers have retained a system of housing numbers, despite apparently seeking to delegate housing decisions to local councils. One reason it works so well is that resistance is nicely contained and directed towards local disputes, which

can be characterized as petty or self-interested, while numbers are attributed with a sense of disinterested detachment, remaining mostly unassailable above the fray. Housing numbers are not invincible, and arguments over allocations of numbers are routinely held in the relatively rarefied context of regional inter-authority negotiations. What is of interest here is the contrast between the lively, localized and relational visions of the future discussed among tenants, villagers, urban residents or other social groups, and the narrow bureaucratic cipher of housing numbers as future-orientation.

This discussion about housing futures illustrates important aspects of forward planning. Forward planning is like consulting oracles in that it is less about desired and feared future than about commenting on the world as it is today, and how we would prefer that it was. It is unlike consulting oracles in the manner of its practice, being embedded in statistical methodologies, demography and cartography, the inaccuracies of the data quietly understated. Increased attempts to involve citizens in planning debates since the 1990s have stumbled at exactly this point, since house builders urging the need for new housing have been largely out of step with local concerns about how the world should be. While house builders and government have been obsessing over housing numbers – just as James Scott indicates – local actors have systematically understood that local decisions are largely predetermined in a hierarchical system. As they learned in practice, objections to a local plan weighed little when the identification of a location for housing had been already secured in a regional plan. To challenge the local decision, they must have challenged the regional decision and been involved in making objections and representations to the regional planning enquiry for the strategic plan. And so on up the system and down again. In other words, to challenge a local plan effectively, you must have already been engaged in challenging plans for around five years at least, to secure the conditions for your local challenge to be

successful. In other words, you require a vision of future potential plans many years in advance if you are to be in a position to amend plans for local futures.ⁱⁱ

<A>What is planning about?

Futures in planning practice take varied forms. Visions of the future becomes figures around which to articulate hopes and fears for collective life, for ideals about nature and culture, about spiritual beliefs and moral standpoints. In the village mentioned above, a great deal of energy was expended by villagers on the reconstruction of the village pond, complete with pumps and water filters, to ensure that it matched the chocolate-box image that made it such an ideal location for filming popular TV series, and gave the village the veneer of being 'archaic' and timeless. The village green was constantly in the process of being perfected to match an idealized image of Englishness that it had probably never previously inhabited. This archaic timelessness was thus the object of future concern, a concern that the future should maintain continuity, that the village should, if anything, be allowed to fulfil the romantic ideal of the English village, while accommodating wealthy commuter demands for luxury living and ease of transport. The future, just as the present, thus encompassed the juxtaposition of contradictory desires and fantasies. Planning futures need to remain sufficiently distant in the future or distant enough in space so as to pose as little threat as possible to the imagined sociable tranquillity of village life.

State or investor-led planning proposals thus emerged into the village as threats to an ongoing project of creating a certain kind of English middle-class home, with the inclusion of housing for subsequent generations of village families. At least for some, that future should include the possibility of sharing current goods with future generations of kin. At the same time, a consistent criticism of planning futures is that they are inadequately informed by the past. Villagers who were not familiar with planning process were aghast at the lack of prior

research before proposals were circulated. No concept of the vernacular history of the village was present in the plan's policies, with the village's entire, contested, radical and archaic history obscured by projected trends in house-building completions. As mentioned above, while villagers saw the previous housing expansions as a trial they had survived, planners saw them as a precedent (an argument that was rehearsed throughout the planning process). From the village perspective, planning's future had no history, invalidating its imagination of the future. So now the future of planning looks rather different: less an open debate about future ideals – be they utopian (ambivalent) or rationalistic – and more a battle over the here and now, and between different continuities. Through proposed plans, a distant and potentially disruptive future came crashing into the lives of villagers, dedicated as so many of them were, to the continuity of the present.

<A>What does anthropology tell us about planning?

Anthropological analysis of the future offers a means to disaggregate the ways that the future is of concern to different people at different times, in different ways, and enables us to see how particular futures may become dominant for shorter or longer moments, or how particular futures appeal in certain contexts. In much the same way that anthropology of history was less concerned with 'what happened in the past' than how histories were discussed, interpreted and reproduced in the present, Wallman's 1992 volume distinguished between writing about how things would be in the future, and considering visions of the future today. She noted different kinds of futures that featured in traditional ethnographies – futures related to specific activities or points in time (harvest, initiation, ceremonies or desired arrivals, such as cargo) but little discussion of future in the abstract. Wallman herself wondered whether the absence of discussion of the future in anthropological research demonstrate an absence of the concept in non-industrial cultures, in which case it might not

be a concept with comparative force, or whether these ethnographers did not ask informants about non-specific future time? (ibid. p. 3).

Rosenberg and Harding (2005) are among those who point out that the supposedly linear futures of the West have never been exclusive, even in that most Western of societies, the USA. Unilinear progress towards an abstract future exists in parallel to the event-focused and circular or ritual futures that Wallman outlines. The future, rather like the past, appears in different guises (cf. Zonabend 1984). The future has different scales – natural, global, social or personal – that are not congruent, and just as in the non-Western societies of an earlier Anthropology, modern people imagine futures associated with ritual or ceremonial cycles (Christmas is always coming), futures in our own biochronology, and varied as well as conflicting visions of futures predicted or desired. We are now well aware that people can hold multiple senses of temporality, just as there are different scales and senses of the past, so it follows that we can hold multiple futures. Planned futures are similarly scaled and contested, filled with competing notions of idealism and pragmatism. As Rosenberg and Harding insist, the future in the modern West ‘is not the empty category that it is supposed to be’ (2005, 8). On the contrary, they argue that the conflict of futures past and present is central to modern temporality, and that this is a paradox of modern dispositions toward the future: *‘while we are taught to believe in the emptiness of the future, we live in a world saturated by future-consciousness as rich and full as our consciousness of the past’* (9). What fascinates Rosenberg and Harding about the future is its infinite potential, as it opens up to a myriad possibilities, in contrast to a past that is finite: finished, closed and determined.ⁱⁱⁱ If the modern period rejected prophecy, it welcomed new techniques of foreseeing the future, projecting fictions and fantasies onto open-ended time. One means of imagining these futures was by fixating on future-dates, dates that were destined eventually to become the past, but

remained far enough ahead to allow for wildly fictive visions of personal flying machines, or technological totalitarianism.

These futures veer between the fantastic and the threatening, both of which can be equally realizable or unimaginable. While town planning is conventionally oriented to a time-horizon that is rarely more than generational, modern industrial society's material impacts will be felt for multi-generational timespans. The lack of fit between the management techniques of contemporary states and the problems to be managed offers a striking insight into the limitations of states and their bureaucracies.

The limitations of conventional planning are clear in Masco's discussion of Desert Modernism, which considers a future threat that is both real, concealed, and continuous, as well as self-perpetuating: the on-going future danger scenario that is nuclear waste storage in Nevada (2005). Here, confident political promises about safe 10,000-year storage facilities are belied by on-site engineers' discussions of the difficulty of securing 100 years of safe storage in a site that is subject to geological faults and variable rock types. Whether or not the storage is technically secure for a hundred, a thousand or ten thousand years, what kind of state is it, Masco asks, that a 10,000-year storage facility could envisage? Can we imagine a nation-state that lasts for ten thousand years, or even a hundred thousand years?^{iv} A narrative of 'absolute technical mastery and control of nature' (36) gives legitimacy to the state's attempts to manage nuclear waste, but has little techno-scientific basis. There are thus two rather different narratives of the future, one envisioning an eternal nation-state that will manage radioactive waste over thousands of years, and one in which the technology of storage might be guaranteed for a hundred years, but after which a new technology must be sought to solve the ongoing problem. Both narratives could be thought of as modern in different ways, but the contradiction between political visions of a techno-state and the reality

of the state of technology are smoothed over by naïve beliefs in technological futures that will secure not only material, but also political continuity.

<A>Conclusions

The future is not going away. On the contrary, anthropologists are becoming increasingly focused on understanding how imagining the future, planning for the future, and acting on the future can tell us about life today. As this analysis of the way that futures are manifested in planning demonstrates, there are many kinds of future – abstract or fantasy, concrete or eventful, domestic or familial, public or political and so on. There are as many ways, if not more, of negotiating this future, of seeking to secure the passage from now to then, of securing action today that ensures desired futures or avoids undesired futures. And exhortations about possible futures can act as signposts for contemporary action, as well as to legitimize current choices. A central paradox of statutory planning in Britain is that it often appears not to accomplish this action of envisioning a desired future and facilitating the move towards it. On the contrary, it appears to be a means to perpetuate existing capitalist relations of investment and return, to stabilize property values and protect the interests of financial investors and commercial actors.^v Yet participants in planning processes understand that such plans will hinder or facilitate their preferred future from coming into being. During the planning process, multiple futures co-exist, as Wallman and Rosenberg and Harding also note.

These contested futures far from the kinds of imaginative future that fuels the hope that has captivated some anthropologists (Crapanzano 2004, Miyazaki 2004, Josephides 2014), although its corollary, despair, is never far away. Such work begs the question of how we can account for the work of imagination that the future demands. Josephides argues that the sense of possibility in hopes about the future are existential, with hope oriented towards a future that is different from the past, and anthropological interest being in the ways in which

people desire that future and act on their desires. In other words, to hope is to imagine a future, while to imagine is to think in the present, whether that is about the future or the past. To imagine is thus existential in that it is an act of being human and eliciting meaning. Imagining the future can thus be conceptualized as a way of thinking out what it is to be oneself, by expanding one's horizon beyond oneself. Planning futures, on the other hand, are supposed not to be about the self, but must be about the grounded and socio-political imagination of the progression from now to a bounded reality to come, yet its means of imagination corresponds to Josephides' existential practice. It is worth noting that such existential imagination is also neither linear nor consistent: changes can be traced in the concepts of future that emerge in planning over time. In the Norwegian context, for example, Vike finds striking changes in the character of the future since World War II (2013). In the post-war period, the welfare state was a future object, for which sacrifices could be made now in the journey towards a utopian future. But in the current welfare state, citizens expect satisfaction now – the welfare state is understood to be in a contemporary future, in which its imperfections are understood as fatal flaws in the present, not obstacles on the way to an ideal future.

If thinking about the future – or imagining a future – is a means of thinking through existence, then Guyer's critique of the changing horizon of the future can be understood as a broad critique of contemporary life. Guyer describes an unease with contemporary present in what she calls 'a strange evacuation of the temporal frame of the "near future" ... of the process of implicating oneself in the ongoing life of the social and material world that used to be encompassed under an expansively inclusive concept of "reasoning"' (2007: 409). Her argument is directed towards changing economic policy, and in particular the combination in monetarist and neo-liberal economics of a prophetic vision of a distant future in which market values work themselves out to perfection, with an immediate future of action in which money

supply is regulated in order to achieve that distant goal of prices determined by supply and demand. For Guyer, this long-term (the long-term in which Keynes noted that ‘we are all dead’) has a parallel in messianic prophecy of evangelical Christianity. Life is divided between the present and the end-times; the present as a hiatus between two eternities, thus removing history and reason and evacuating the space of medium-term action. Her concept of temporal horizons is particularly useful in contrasting the scales of future that are argued through planning, with its immediate, near, medium and distant timescales.

In summarizing where the analysis of planning futures takes us, we may usefully add to the list of statements that Wallman compiled, which offer a valuable starting point for conceptualizing the significance of the future in contemporary rhetoric and practice:^{vi}

<EXT>

- That the future can be used to justify present action – a forward-looking version of mythical charter.
 - Scenarios of the future function to illuminate the present and/or to offer at-a-distance and so politically (and emotionally?) safe ways of criticising it.
-
- Belief in the future underpins the sense of self and its survival.
 - Changes in those beliefs, however generated, can work radically to alter the way individuals and groups relate to each other, to the natural environment, and to culture itself.” (Ibid.: 16)

To these we might add that the future can be put to work in the service of a promise, in the context of a correct set of ritual and social circumstances such that the future does not merely hold out promise, but is implicated in the act of promising. Such promises may be

politically effective or infelicitous. We do not necessarily know that the promise is infelicitous until the promised outcome is not fulfilled, by which time the promise may have served its purpose.

One further capacity that the future has is thus to defer dilemmas that are irreconcilable, to structure difficulties and to respond to dissonance. We know that our lives today are initiating consequences that can be catastrophic in the future. We know that driving cars or burning gas contributes to climate change, yet for most people it is impossible to continue with their established life without these things happening. The collective – and certainly the political – response, not surprisingly, is to shunt them forward, to make promises about how we may act in the future; promises that may or may not be infelicitous, or more or less convincing.

State planning is also imagined as a mechanism to compensate for the inability of citizens otherwise to address large, overarching or structural challenges of the kind generated by state modernism itself (hence the resort to idealized settlement sizes for sustainability). The archetypal Western Modernist abstract notion of “The Future” is dependent on a unilinear view of time and optimism, with an underlying sense of progression toward something better. Enlightenment visions of progress required an optimistic future to counter a puritan day of doom in which earth and humanity would inevitably be destroyed. Ironically, astronomy tells us that this will come, but given that the timescale of its coming is on such a different plane to our own sense of lifetime and time passing, it remains possible to remove it in some way from everyday consciousness (cf. Guyer 2007). It is another form of the death that we all know is coming, that is part of life, and that largely fails to dampen human enthusiasm for that life. The future offers life *and* death, and this is one of its paradoxes: not resolved but suspended because of the incompatibility of the ideas and the uncertainty of their timings. As Guyer has pointed out, the horizons of the future are shifting, but they still

provide a guide to the present through the imaginative work of linking different futures with present possibilities and moral imperatives. This chapter has thus considered the fantasy of planned futures that enable a life in the present.

<A>References

- Abram, S., 2001a. Amongst Professionals: Working with Pressure Groups and Local Authorities. In D. Gellner and E. Hirsch (eds). *Inside Organisations: Anthropologists at Work*, pp. 183–203. Oxford: Berg.
- Abram, S., 2001b. All that fuss over 100 houses: identities and moralities of building on land'. In M. Saltman (ed.). *Identity, Ethnicity and Territoriality*, pp. 71–92. Oxford: Berg.
- Abram, S., 2011. *Culture and Planning*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Abram, Simone and Gisa Weszkalnys, 2013. Elusive Promises: Planning in the contemporary world: An introduction. In S. Abram and G. Weszkalnys (eds). *Elusive Promises: Planning in the contemporary world*, pp. 1–33. Oxford: Berghahn.
- Abram, Simone and Gisa Weszkalnys, eds, 2013. *Elusive Promises: Planning in the contemporary world*. Oxford: Berghahn.
- Atiyah, P. S., 1981. *Promises, Morals, and Law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Austin, J. L., 1962. *How to do Things with Words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Baxstrom, R., 2013. Even Governmentality Begins as an Image. Institutional Planning in Kuala Lumpur. In S. Abram and G. Weszkalnys (eds). *Elusive Promises: Planning in the contemporary world*, pp. 137–53. Oxford: Berghahn.
- Bear, L., 2014. Doubt, Conflict, Mediation: the anthropology of modern time. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, special issue 20(S1).

- Briggs J. L., 1992. Lines, Cycles and transformations: Temporal perspectives on Inuit action. In Sandra Wallman, *Contemporary Futures. Perspectives from Social Anthropology*, pp. 83–108. London/NY: Routledge.
- Crapanzano, V., 2004. *Imaginative Horizons*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- DCLG. Department for Communities and Local Government, 2012. *National Planning Policy Framework March 2012* (ISBN: 978-1-4098-3413-7).
- Dorling, D., 2015. All that is Solid: How the Great Housing Disaster Defines Our Times, and What We Can Do About It. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Guyer, J., 2007. Prophecy and the near future: Thoughts on macroeconomic, evangelical, and punctuated time. *American Ethnologist*, 34(3) 409–21.
- Josephides, L., 2014. Imagining the Future: An Existential and Practical Activity. In W. Rollason (ed.). *Pacific Futures: Projects, Politics and Interests*. Oxford: Berghahn, 28–47.
- Masco, Joseph, 2005. A Notebook on Desert Modernism: From the Nevada test site to Liberace's two-hundred-pound suit. In Daniel Rosenberg and Susan Harding (eds.). *Histories of the Future*, pp. 23–49. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Miller, P. and N. Rose, 1990. Governing Economic Life. *Economy and Society*, 19: 1–31.
- Miyazaki, H., 2004. *The Method of Hope*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Murdoch, J. and S. Abram, 2002. *Rationalities of Planning*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Nader, Laura, 1972. Up the Anthropologist – perspectives gained from studying up. In Dell H. Hymes (ed.). *Reinventing Anthropology*, pp. 284–311. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Peattie, L. R., 1970. *The View from the Barrio*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Peattie, L. R., 1987. *Planning: Rethinking Ciudad Guayana*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

- Pink, S. and T. Lewis, 2014. Making resilience: everyday affect and global affiliation in Australian Slow Cities. *Cultural Geographies*, 21(4): 695–710.
- Porter, L., 2010. *Unlearning the Colonial Cultures of Planning*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Reade, E., 1987. *British Town and Country Planning*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Rosenberg, Daniel and Susan Harding, 2005. *Histories of the Future*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Scott, J. C., 1998. *Seeing like a state: how certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Searle, J. R., 1969. *Speech acts: an essay in the philosophy of language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Vike, H., 2013. Utopian Time and Contemporary Time: Temporal dimensions of planning and reform in the Norwegian welfare state. In S. Abram and G. Weszkalnys (eds). *Elusive Promises: Planning in the contemporary world*, pp. 35–55. Oxford: Berghahn,
- Wallman, Sandra, 1992. Contemporary Futures. *Perspectives from Social Anthropology*. ASA Monographs 30. London and NY: Routledge.
- Zonabend, F., 1984. *The Enduring Memory: Time and history in a French village*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

<Notes>Notes

The European Commission has long employed a persistent tactic of public awareness-raising by insisting that its emblem be displayed on any development project in receipt of European Union funding.

-
- ii The same effectively applies to political engagement, since alliances and compromises over local planning decisions happen within the council over a long period, and each local politician is in a minority position in relation to specific housing locations.
- iii Rosenberg and Harding consider the Y2K bug as a contemporary reproduction of apocalyptic dread, one that, of course, was a huge anti-climax.
- iv See <http://www.intoeternitythemovie.com/> on the Finnish 100,000 year repository for nuclear waste.
- v In contrast to Scandinavian plans, with their glowing slogans about idealized common social futures, British plans offer little to the casual reader.
- vi Within Wallman's collection there are essays that challenge the very deterministic notion of future that is implicit in the statements, such as the framing of 'the natural environment'. In countering accusations that Inuit are accused of not being 'future-oriented', Jean Briggs emphasized the investment in equipping children to become competent adults, in contrast to the rejection of material accumulation that is sometimes seen by colonial critics as an inability to think ahead. On the contrary, the nomadic life requires a shrewd form of investment in adaptable objects that remove the need for accumulated objects, and the long-term is practiced in the sustaining of relations over time (Briggs 1992).